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Holy Wine Online: Deir Cremisan in Digital Space

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the visual materials of the Cremisan Winery Estate's Facebook page to argue that Cremisan's digital presence is complex and multivocal, eschewing binaries of digital food activism or consumer-oriented marketing. My approach (using digital and "analog" research) grounds media analysis in site visits and sees digital content as a method of creatively resisting oppressive structures and digital space as locations in which interactions occur. I suggest that Deir Cremisan's Facebook page participates in a complex discourse between contemporary political debates, piety, local and international commodity markets, and the pragmatics of the daily operations of running a vineyard and winery.

KEYWORDS Palestine, activism, digital, ethnography, social media, wine

A narrow, undulating road that snakes through the brambly beige aridity of the West Bank opens into the small oasis of Deir Cremisan, a nineteenth-century monastery and winery in Beit Jala that produces wines, spirits, and olive oil. Standing on the grounds of the winery, which are dotted with deep-red flowers and overlooking the terraced slopes of grape vines, you can see the Israeli settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo on nearby hills. The winery's interior is cool, the stone floors creating gentle echoes as we walk past the steel and oak barrels in which wine ferments. During a private tour of Deir Cremisan in 2017, my guide shared that the land sits on a natural aquifer and provides employment to Palestinians and financial support for their families.

My next attempt to visit the winery, in March 2018, was interrupted by a barrier, built of rods of metal inserted into concrete foundations, chain-link fencing, and spools of barbed wire spilled along the top. This fence is a part of the ongoing extensions of Israel's separation barrier, justified by Israel as a security measure. Although the barrier through Deir Cremisan was unfinished, its purposes were clear: to disrupt movement and agricultural activity, create visual obstacles, deter visitors, and assert Israeli control.

Looking at the Cremisan Wine Estate's Facebook page, however, one would not know about this extension of Israeli occupation. Cremisan Winery's social media presence has an ambiguous relationship to politics and activism. The vineyard and winery are in Area A (areas of the West Bank under full control of the Palestinian Authority), are operated exclusively by Palestinians, and have been bisected by the separation barrier. While many articles refer to the West Bank as "Occupied Palestinian Territory") or its impacts on producing and exporting wine, the Facebook page does not "perform" its politics overtly

through references to, *inter alia*, Israeli occupation. These conspicuous omissions raise questions about the winery's relationship with social media and its identity in digital spaces. This piece discusses part of an ongoing project, which I started in 2018. I have carried out digital ethnographic research, including participant observation of Deir Cremisan's Facebook page (a public page maintained by Fadi Batarseh, the chief winemaker).[1] My digital ethnographic research on Deir Cremisan's Facebook page is grounded in my visits to the winery, semi-structured interviews, and close readings of several hundred consumer reviews of Deir Cremisan wines.

I focus on the visual materials of the Cremisan Winery Estate's Facebook page to argue that Cremisan's digital presence is complex and multivocal, eschewing binaries of digital food activism or consumer-oriented marketing. Instead, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page and products highlight the beauty of the landscape and the quality of its wines and spirits to sell products that, ultimately, provide employment for Palestinian families living under the constant threats of occupation. Many agricultural initiatives and collectives in the West Bank are overtly political in their digital self-fashioning and product packaging. For instance, over 1,400 Palestinian farmers are members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association, an organization that assists Palestinian producers to obtain fair trade certification and find international markets for Palestinian food products including olive oil, za'atar, honey, and freekeh.[2] On a smaller scale, The Kale Project was established in 2015 in rural Jenin to provide Palestinians with access to local, high-quality produce; its founder speaks openly about the challenges of Israeli occupation for Palestinian sovereignty and food sovereignty.[3]

Digital Discourses of Palestinian Wine

While not mentioning Palestinian labor or Israeli occupation explicitly, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page facilitates the imagination of the winery operating otherwise: beyond constant control and surveillance by Israeli military forces and without being defined in conflict-reductive terms. The use of non-tangible, digital space to imagine otherwise functions as a response to the physical lack of such a space. In the absence of freedom of mobility and trade for Palestinians, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page creates, through its posts that dialogue asynchronously with audiences around the world, a location in which a greater deal of liberty and equity can be experienced.

My work is informed by "the digital turn in food practices, politics, and activism" and culinary culture as a "site of everyday politics and ethics," including in the digital sphere.[4] I collect texts and images from social media accounts over a period of several weeks, months, or years; this long-term, granular approach helps to "problematise reductionist understandings of "the digital" and reflect the porous boundaries between "digital" and "analogue" food."[5] My use of digital and "analog" research grounds media analysis in digital

ethnographic approaches and site visits, seeing digital content as both primary documents and as a place in which interactions occur.[6]

Food is political and politicized, and the literature on foodways in Palestine/Israel is rich.[7] The West Bank wines and spirits produced by Deir Cremisan are "commodit[ies] in motion," with lives of their own within and beyond Deir Cremisan.[8] These lives pull the winery into political and religious discussions.[9] In the context of viral social justice movements like #MeToo and #BLM, activism is articulated and debated online, and the importance of consumer activism has been discussed extensively.[10] Perhaps surprisingly, however, the Deir Cremisan Facebook page and many consumers discuss the wine as neither Palestinian nor Israeli, but as "wine of the holy land," seemingly evidencing Monterescu and Handel's observation that Cremisan wine can be categorized as "Palestinian," "Israeli," or "apolitical."[11] Yet, I suggest that avoiding the use of these terms is part of the winery's pragmatic politics, allowing it to concentrate on wine production and employment for Palestinians.

The Holy Land on Facebook: Deir Cremisan's Visual Rhetoric

The Cremisan Estate Facebook page, whose handle "@CremisanWineEstate1885" refers to the date of the monastery's establishment, contains approximately 760 photos, which I divide into four main categories: landscape images (vineyards, harvests, and fermentation processes), international events (visitors to the winery), institutional capital (Deir Cremisan's participation in and awards from local and international wine festivals and competitions), and finished products (wines, brandies, 'araq, etc.). The types of posts most common on the Facebook page allow the page to perform several functions.

The first function of the Facebook posts is to root Cremisan Winery within its local community. These posts demonstrate Cremisan Winery's ties to local retailers such as the Bethlehem market and boutique shops in Beit Jala and Beit Sahour where its products are sold. For example, a post in Arabic from March 2020 relates how the winery supported Bethlehem pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic by distributing alcohol to them.

Another post, from December 2019, includes a link to a "B is for Bacchus" podcast featuring the winery, which discusses "the importance of using local indigenous varieties." Other photos show wine bottle labels with "West Bank" and "autochthonous dry red wine," the most overt references to debates over land ownership. Visitors to the page see that the winery participates in its community through benevolence, as well as through discourses of indigeneity. The latter suggests that Palestinians in the West Bank connect to the land through the foods they cultivate and produce.[12]

Second, the Facebook page illustrates the winery's international presence and connections to global markets of trade and solidarity. It promotes products for global export, like brandy for export to the United States; showcases official global ties including visits from politicians; and demonstrates international support through photos and videos of visits from international tour groups. It is interesting to note that most comments (in Arabic or English) appear apolitical; most people "like" posts, and, if followers post comments, they include a "congratulations," a positive comment about the wines, or an inquiry about where to purchase the wine.

https://www.facebook.com/CremisanWinery1885/photos/pb.100057414372592.-2207520000

type=3>

Figure 1. This 2017 post shows Deir Cremisan's Baladi, Dabouki, Baladi, and Hamdani/Jandali wines with medals from an international wine competition.

Third, the page creates and reiterates a narrative that locates Deir Cremisan in the Holy Land. This self-fashioning allows the wines, spirits, and oils produced by the winery to take on fluid meanings and to participate in consumer solidarity with Palestinians by emphasizing the grapes' West Bank terroir. At the same time, the wines can be packaged

as part of an experience of the land of the Bible (and Torah), sidestepping vehement contemporary debates about occupation, Palestinian independence, and Zionism.[13] The "About" section of the Facebook page locates Deir Cremisan's beginnings with Italian missionary Fr. Antonio Bellone, who, in the 1860s, established orphanages and a religious educational house. The winery provided work for locals and income for the educational house. After Fr. Bellone joined the Salesian order, the order supported the winery and mission. The Facebook posts never mention Israel, nor do the photos or videos depict the separation barrier that bisects the winery's lands. I argue that this decision creates a "palatable authenticity," using discourses of localness and religiosity that assert legitimacy without engaging in explicitly political topics, while supporting the logistics and economics of running a vineyard and winery.[14]

Deir Cremisan's Facebook page participates in a complex discourse between contemporary political debates, piety, local and international commodity markets, and the pragmatics of running a vineyard and winery while providing employment to Palestinians. The interconnectedness of public relations agendas and the grassroots reactions in public Facebook posts informs how the winery navigates a tense political climate while endeavoring to run a successful business. Long-term observation of the social media activities of Deir Cremisan adds nuance to understandings of the political, economic, and cultural importance of the winery and, more broadly, the ways in which foodways shed light on various actors' involvement in political and consumer activism. In the case of Deir Cremisan, navigating a delicate balance of competing needs and resisting the hegemonic presence of Israeli occupation at times takes a perhaps surprising form—one that avoids overtly political digital activism to creatively resist Israeli structures of occupation, imagining a winery that does not live in the shadows of a separation barrier.

Notes

1. Fadi Batarseh, in discussion with the author, May 13, 2021.
2. Palestinian Fair Trade Association, "Who We Are," palestinefairetrade.org, accessed December 4, 2022, https://palestinefairtrade.org/about-us/who-we-are < https://palestinefairtrade.org/about-us/who-we-are/> .
3. The Kale Project, Facebook page, accessed December 10, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/kaleprojectpalestine/about < https://www.facebook.com/kaleprojectpalestine/about> .
4. Tania Lewis, "Food Politics and the Media in Digital Times: Researching Household Practices as Forms of Digital Food Activism," in *Research Methods in Digital Food Studies*, ed. Jonatan Leer and Stinne Gunder Strøm Krogager (London: Routledge, 2021), 100.
5. Tanja Schneider and Karin Eli, "How to Bring an Ethnographic Approach to Studies of Digital Food and Digital Eating," in *Research Methods in Digital Food Studies*, 72.
6. Alana Mann, "Beyond the Hashtag: Social Media Ethnography in Food Activism," in *Research Methods in Digital Food Studies,* 93–94; Christina Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 56 and 86; Schneider and Eli, "How to Bring," 74; Lewis, "Food Politics," 106.

7. See, for example, work by Anne Meneley, Dafna Hirsch and Ofra Tene, and Nir Avieli. Anne Meneley, "Blood, Sweat and Tears in a Bottle of Palestinian Extra-Virgin Olive Oil," *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 14, no. 2 (2011): 277, https://doi.org/10.2752/175174411X12893984828872 < https://doi.org/10.2752/175174411X12893984828872> ; Dafna Hirsch and Ofra Tene, "Hummus: The Making of an Israeli Culinary Cult," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 13, no. 1 (2013): 25–45; Nir Avieli, *Food and Power: A Culinary Ethnography of Israel* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

8. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.

9. Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*; Meneley, "Blood, Sweat and Tears," 277; Daniel Monterescu and Ariel Handel, "Liquid Indigeneity: Wine, Science, and Colonial Politics in Israel/Palestine," *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 3 (August 2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12827 < https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12827> .

10. Peter Weltman, "How Wine Buyers Can Be Activists," *SevenFifty*, September 13, 2017, accessed March 11, 2021, https://daily.sevenfifty.com/how-wine-buyers-can-be-activists < https://daily.sevenfifty.com/how-wine-buyers-can-be-activists/> .

11. Monterescu and Handel, "Liquid Indigeneity," 2, 4.

12. Jennifer Shutek, "Romanticizing the Land: Agriculturally Imagined Communities in Palestine/Israel," *Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society Graduate Students Association* 12, no. 1 (2013), 32.

13. Ronald Ranta and Yonatan Mendel, "Consuming Palestine: Palestine and Palestinians in Israeli Food Culture," *Ethnicities* 14, no. 3 (2014): 416; Jennifer Shutek, "Eating Otherwise: Foodways of Alterity in Palestine/Israel," (PhD diss., New York University, 2023), 197.

14. Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 44.

Author Information

Jennifer Ruth Shutek

Jennifer Ruth Shutek pursued their BA at Simon Fraser University with a major in history, a minor in English literature, and a concentration in French. She then earned her MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Oxford and obtained an MPhil and PhD in Food Studies from New York University. Throughout their academic career, Jennifer has travelled extensively, living in Oxford, Fez, New York, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Tel Aviv. Over a decade of teaching has given Jennifer rich pedagogical experience. As well as teaching children's cooking classes and English as an Additional Language, Jennifer has taught at Simon Fraser University and New York University and has also worked as a writing consultant at the New York University Steinhardt Writing Center. Jennifer has worked in journalism, copyediting, and social media management, with publications appearing in academic journals, digital magazines, and academic blogs. She is currently an academic advisor based out of Vancouver, BC and is working on two books, one on the mutually constitutive relationships between place-making and foodways in Palestine/Israel and the other on the aesthetic and affective roles of food in video games.

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